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ABSTRACT

This study assesses whether or not there is a significant difference in school climate, as reported by students' affective attitudes, toward curriculum and instruction for a cohort from one academic year to the next when intervention programs have been introduced. In the fall of 1989, the Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools Education Outcomes Measures research team (four Mississippi school districts) began a longitudinal study on improving school climate. The Minnesota School Attitude Survey, which assesses students' perceptions of their school experiences, was administered to students in the fourth grade during the 1989-90 school year and to students in the fifth grade in the 1990-91 school year. Since only the Hinds County Public Schools (HCPS) continued the longitudinal study, this paper compares data for 2 years for 6 schools in this district. Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were computed. The results indicate significant differences in students' attitudes affecting school climate. Students' responses to questions about curriculum and instruction, in terms of important and pleasant, indicate significant differences in subscale scores after implementation of intervention programs for 1 academic year. The HCPS hired school counselors for each school, whose programs focused on students' positive self-esteem. Principals and teachers reported more student involvement, improved student attitudes, and improved school climate. (RLC)

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OUTCOME MEASURES:

SCHOOL CLIMATE: CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

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REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

It has been noted that the climate of the school makes a difference in a student's attitude, and that a student's school achievement is affected by the student's attitude. School climate, therefore, has a positive or a negative affect upon student achievement particularly students at risk.

Baker and Sansone (1990) indicate several studies on dropouts which focus on the correlation of student behavior and attitude with student decisions to leave school. They report certain factors in the school climate which may affect students' decisions to leave school before they graduate. Some of these factors include the organization of the school, attitudes of the teachers, and school leadership. Baker and Sansone also believe that some of the answers to the dropout problem may be found within the schools themselves.

School climate can be defined as how everyone feels about the school and the people involved within the school. The psychological and physical environment also has an impact upon the climate of the school. The feelings and emotions of the teachers, students, administrators, and the community are reflected in the climate (Kaplan and Geoffroy, 1990).

Kaplan and Geoffroy (1990) also believe that learning and teaching can be affected positively by school climate variables. Reform in education stresses emphasis upon meeting teachers' and students' affective needs as well as their cognitive needs. Kaplan

and Geoffroy note that students and teachers who are frustrated and unhappy cannot learn nor teach effectively.

Creating a new environment for students and teachers will make growth possible. Kaplan and Geoffroy (1990) conclude by stating the environment should be one in which trust, high expectations, and fairness are exemplified. A participatory environment allows students and teachers to have a sense of increased personalization. A positive school climate reflects the attitude of the organization. This atmosphere encourages a people-centered system where feelings of self-worth, pride, respect, and trust are fostered. Kaplan and Geoffroy also note that, as the needs of the people change, a positive climate changes to meet those needs.

Gage (1990) states that underlying factors which cause students to drop out needs to be considered. These underlying factors include living in poverty, being of a minority culture, and having low or failing grades. These factors contribute to feelings of alienation from school and peers, which lowers self-esteem. Withdrawal from extracurricular activities and withdrawal from identification with the school is caused by alienation feelings.

Programs which enhance teacher involvement with students, lower teacher-student ratios, and demonstrate concern toward students make a difference in students' attitudes. Gage (1990) also reported that low absenteeism and dropout rates were affected by those factors.

Negative attitudes about school exist among some dropouts. Dropouts report boring and uncaring teachers, overcrowded rooms and sometimes gang violence (Tidwell 1988). Tidwell reports that dropouts believed that more learning opportunities should be given to them by the teachers. The respondents in the study wanted to see an improvement in the behavior and attitudes of the teachers. Caring, sensitivity and tolerance were elements cited as being needed from the teachers.

Damico, Fradd, Roth, and Hankins (1990) state that schools can send out negative signals to at risk students. Students can perceive that they are unworthy and unable to continue in the educational process. The authors reported that schools with a high rate of graduation were the ones which made the students believe they were important and that adults cared about them.

Bearden, Spencer, and Moracco (1989) confirm that students' perception of themselves, along with the school experience, are fundamentally important. The school climate could actually decrease a student's motivation for learning. Respect and interest from teachers and administrators are very seldom felt by at risk students.

It is noted by Whelan, Torbet, and Teddlie (1990) that in order to change the students' attitudes about school, the environment of the school needs to improve. They note that students' attitudes largely influence the decision to stay in school.

Simonson (1990) found that students with favorable attitudes toward the content being taught tend to achieve more than those students with poor attitudes. Simonson believes that students' affective growth is just as important as academic achievement.

It is the schools' response to the students' background that determines success in school. It was found that self-esteem and other psychological variables are linked to data on at risk students. Ruben reports that negative school experiences tends to reinforce a student's poor self-esteem and negative attitude towards school (Ruben, 1989).

Gerler and Anderson (1986) believe that positive school attitudes may be increased through participation in classroom guidance activities. If the students' attitudes are positively influenced, their academic success is postively influenced.

Hamby (1989) states that it is important to understand why so many students dropout of school. These students feel that school is a threatening place and they try to escape that feeling. Hamby recommends that educators change the atmosphere to a non-threatening one. It must enhance the students' learning and not stifle it. School must become the place they can identify with and make a commitment to. Treating students with respect and acceptance and making them competent learners, are two ways in which to accomplish that task. Hamby states that the key is a school environment reflecting the concern and caring of competent teachers.

It is essential that the school climate should ensure that students feel as safe and secure as possible. The climate should be positive so that each student's self-esteem is enhanced (Hamby, 1989).

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1989, the Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) Education Outcome Measures research team, began a longitudinal study focusing on improvement of school climate within their schools. The team was originally composed of Hinds County Public Schools, Laurel Public Schools, Greenwood Public Schools, and Meridian Public Schools. The school districts chose to monitor school climate by surveying students' affective attitudes about curriculum and instruction. However, Hinds County Public Schools is the only school district that chose to continue the longitudinal study; therefore, the focus of this paper is on that school district.

The research team established the following 1989-1990 goals:

1. To establish a data base of affective attitudes cohort group by administering the Minnesota School Attitude Survey,
2. To examine the affective impact of instructional programs and to identify areas of concern, and
3. To develop appropriate intervention plans.

The achievement of these goals was obtained through the following:

1. The administration of the Minnesota School Attitude Survey in Spring 1990 to the entire fourth grade cohort group in all schools within each school district.

2. Principals, teachers, and curriculum coordinator identifying particular areas of concern for their particular schools, and
3. Principals, teachers, and curriculum coordinators developing and implementing appropriate intervention plans.

The following goals were established for 1990-1991:

1. To readminister the Minnesota School Attitude Survey to the cohort group in 1991 as a means of monitoring the effectiveness of the intervention plans, and
2. To repeat the review cycle, and implement appropriate intervention plans.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Is there a significant difference in school climate, as reported by students' affective attitudes, towards curriculum and instruction, for a cohort group from one academic year to the next when intervention programs have been introduced?

LIMITATIONS

It is assumed that the students responded truthfully to the survey questions.

It is recognized that other external forces may affect school climate but they are beyond the scope of this study.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The PREPS Education Outcome Measures research team (Hinds County, Laurel, Greenwood, and Meridian Public Schools) met in September 1989 to formulate 1989-1990 short-term goals of it's longitudinal research project. The research team selected The Minnesota School Attitude Survey (MSAS) as the appropriate instrument to collect information about curriculum and instruction. The Upper Level of the MSAS was administered in the Spring of 1990 to the entire fourth grade cohort group of each school district. CTB/McMillan-McGraw Hill scored the survey instruments. Results were forwarded to the researcher in July. Individual summary graphs were created for each school. Both hard copy and summary graphs were forwarded to each school district.

In August 1990, school personnel (principal, teachers, curriculum coordinators) identified areas of concern for their schools. By September 1990, the school personnel had developed and begun implementing specific school intervention plans.

In Spring, 1991, the cohort group was resurveyed. Institutional Research at Mississippi State University scored the survey instruments.

INSTRUMENTATION

The Minnesota School Attitude Survey (MSAS) is designed to assess students perceptions of various areas of their experiences in school. The Upper Form of MSAS is designed for grades four through twelve and is divided into two parts. Part 1 assesses "students' reactions to academic subjects, school personnel, self-

expression, peers, and various learning modes and situations" (p. 1). Students respond to two, 1 to 5 Likert-type Scales, Important-Unimportant and Pleasant-Unpleasant, for each question. Item responses to Part 1 in the Upper Form are combined into subscale scores: Basic Subjects, Other Subjects, Fine Arts, Learning Activities, Extra-Class Activities, Student Role Autonomy, Self-Expression, School Personnel, and Other Students. Part 2 assesses "students' feeling of support, pressure, motivation, acceptance and exclusion, cooperation and competition, and self-worth within the school setting" (p. 2). Students respond to a 1 to 4 True/False Likert-type Scale. Item responses to Part 2 in the Upper Form are combined into subscale scores: "Academic Support, Personal Support, Acceptance, Fairness, Academic Pressure, Competition, External Motivation, Personal Worth as a Student, Need for Structure, Cooperation, and Internal Motivation" (p. 2).

The MSAS has a reported Cronbach coefficient alphas for Part 1 subscales from .56 to .82 for Important-Unimportant and from .68 to .72 for Pleasant-Unpleasant. Part 2 reported Cronbach coefficient alphas for subscales True/False from .39 to .85. Factor analysis and task force review support construct and content validity for the instrument.

SAMPLE

The study population consisted of all students enrolled in the fourth grade during the 1989-91 academic school years for the following school districts:

Hinds County Public Schools

Laurel Public Schools

Greenwood Public Schools

Meridian Public Schools

During the 1990-91 academic school year, the population consisted of the cohort group enrolled in the fifth grade for the same school districts.

TREATMENT OF DATA

Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were computed for each school's data using SPSS-X on the main frame through the Tramel Computing Center at Mississippi State University. As suggested by the test publisher, differences in mean scores of .3 were considered to be statistically significant.

RESULTS

Hinds County School Climate Evaluation: Comparison of Two Years

BOLTON ATTENDANCE CENTER

In the initial year of data collection, there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students on the following Part 1 Important subscales: Basic Subjects, Other Subjects, Learning Activities, Student Role, and School Personnel. There was also a statistically significant

difference in the mean scores of the students on three Part 1 Pleasant subscales: Basic Subjects, Learning Activities, and Student Role. Furthermore, there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students for three Part 2 True/False subscales: Academic Support, Fairness, and External Motivation.

The 1991 post intervention scores reflected a statistically significant difference in student attitudes for all subscales in Part 1. However, there was a statistically significant difference in mean scores for only one of the subscale scores for Part 2: Academic Pressure.

CARVER ELEMENTARY

There was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students for the following Part 1 Important subscales: Basic Subjects, Other Subjects, Learning Activities, Extra-Class Activities, Student Role and Autonomy. There was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students for seven out of eleven Part 2 True/False subscales: Academic Support, Personal Support, Acceptance, Fairness, Competition, Personal Worth as a Student, and Cooperation.

The 1991 post intervention scores reflected a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for all subscales in Part 1. Statistically significant differences were noted for two Part 2 subscale scores: Student Role and Autonomy.

EDWARDS ATTENDANCE CENTER

There was a statistically significant difference in the mean

scores of the students for the following Part 1 Important subscales: Basic Subjects, Other Subjects, Learning Activities, Extra-Class Activities, Student Role, Autonomy, Self-Expression, and School Personnel. There was also a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for eight out of ten Part 1 Pleasant subscale scores: Basic Subjects, Other Subjects, Fine Arts, Learning Activities, Extra-Class Activities, Student Role, Autonomy, and School Personnel. Statistically significant differences in mean scores were found for nine Part 2 True/False subscales: Academic Support, Personal Support, Acceptance, Fairness, Competition, Personal Worth as a Student, Need for Structure, Cooperation, and Internal Motivation.

The 1991 post intervention scores reflected a statistically significant difference in mean scores for all subscales in Part 1. There was a statistically significant difference found on three Part 2 True/False subscale scores: Competition, Personal Worth as a Student, and Need for Structure.

GARY ROAD ELEMENTARY/BYRD ATTENDANCE CENTER

There was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for the following Part 1 Important Subscale scores: Basic Subjects, Other Subjects, Learning Activities, Student Role, and School Personnel. Statistically significant differences were also found for the following Part 1 Pleasant subscales: Learning Activities, Student Role, Autonomy, and School Personnel. There was a statistically significant difference in the following Part 2 True/False subscales: Academic Support, Personal Support,

Acceptance, Fairness, Personal Worth as a Student, Cooperation, and Internal Motivation.

The 1991 post intervention scores reflected a statistically significant difference in student attitudes for all subscales in Part 1. Only one significant difference was noted for Part 2 True/False subscale scores: External Motivation.

MIXON ELEMENTARY

There was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students for the following Part 1 Important subscales: Basic Subjects, Other Subjects, Learning Activities, Student Role, and School Personnel. Furthermore, there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students for three Part 1 Pleasant subscales: Basic Subjects, Learning Activities, and Student Role. There was also a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students for three Part 2 True/False subscales: Academic Support, Fairness, and Internal Motivation.

The 1991 post intervention scores reflected a statistically significant difference in mean scores for all subscales in Part 1. Only two statistically significant differences were noted in the Part 2 True/False subscales: External Motivation and Personal Worth as a Student.

PERRYMAN ELEMENTARY

There was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students for the following Part 1 Important subscales: Basic Subjects, Other Subjects, Learning Activities, Student Role, and School Personnel. There was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students for six

Part 1 Pleasant subscales: Basic Subjects, Other Subjects, Fine Arts, Learning Activities, Student Role, School Personnel. For seven Part 2 subscales, there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students: Academic Support, Personal Support, Acceptance, Fairness, Personal Worth as a Student, Need for Structure, and Internal Motivation.

The 1991 post intervention scores reflect statistically significant differences in all Part 1 Important subscale scores. There was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the students on all but one Part 1 Pleasant subscale score, Student Role. There were statistically significant differences found on four Part 2 True/False subscales. Students' attitudes reflected less Academic Support, more Academic Pressure, less External Motivation, and less Internal Motivation.

CONCLUSIONS

Review of the data has revealed significant differences in students' attitudes affecting school climate as measured by the Minnesota School Survey. Students' responses to questions concerning curriculum and instruction in Part 1, Important and Pleasant, indicate significant differences in subscale scores after implementation of intervention programs for one academic year. Intervention programs were designed by school personnel to address specific attitudinal needs. The Hinds County School District hired school counselors for each school. The programs that the counselors established focused primarily on students' positive self-esteem. Principals and teachers report more student

involvement, improved student attitudes, and improved school climate.

Subscales in Part 2 for most of the schools reveal no significant difference in the mean scores. Therefore, it is suggested that school personnel maintain currently implemented programs and address the subscales in Part 2.

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